

# Prayer practices among Palestinian Christians in Occupied Palestinian Territory

**A**rab Palestinian Christians face many challenges living in the Occupied Palestinian Territory; restrictions of movement, a poor employment situation and rising emigration. According to previous research, religion and prayer provide strength and hope in the midst of the ongoing conflict. This research has used qualitative methods and the data was collected in the occupied Palestinian Territory in February–April and November 2017. Thirty-five participants were interviewed about their practice of prayer. The interviews were semi-structured. The aim of this paper is to examine how prayer is utilised among the Palestinian Christians to cope in stressful life situations and how prayer types are utilised across generations. Content analysis revealed four prayer types: petitionary, ritualistic, meditative and thanksgiving. The results suggest that prayer is major coping device and the utilisation of prayer varies across the generations.

## Introduction

Prayer is probably the most often-used personal type of religiosity and the most commonly-employed coping device (Hood *et al.* 1996: 394). In recent decades prayer as a coping strategy has been studied comprehensively. Many scholars have emphasised the importance of prayer in the coping process (Carver *et al.* 1989: 279; Bänzinger *et al.* 2008: 112) and different theories and practices have been developed (Stroebe and Schut 1999; Pargament 1997; Pargament *et al.* 2000; Janssen *et al.* 2000).

Numerous studies provide evidence of a positive effect of prayer on general well-being (Fabricatore and Handal 2000: 225; Maltby *et al.* 1999: 373; Poloma and Pendleton 1989: 51), facing severe illness (Ai *et al.* 2000: 215–17; Cardella and Friedlander 2004:

31–3) and adjustment to mortal illness or near-death life situations (Phelps *et al.* 2009: 1145–6; Fry 1990: 746–7). However, the effects of religion or prayer in coping are not always positive. Research reports suggest that for example for those with mental health issues religious forms of coping may not be optimal (Bryan *et al.* 2016: 50–1; Strawbridge *et al.* 1998: 122–3). Negative correlations of religious coping have also been reported in relation to the death of a friend (Park and Cohen 1993: 572–4).

Coping in the midst of the Israel–Palestine conflict has been studied comprehensively. In the field of psychology and health research, the research has been focused on the effects of exposure to violence and war-related environments. The results indicate that living in a hostile environment may cause post-traumatic stress symptoms (PTS), anxiety, and have negative impacts on health (Thabet *et al.* 2002: 1802–3; Dubow *et al.* 2012: 841–2; Hobfoll 2012: 16–18).

Studies on coping in the midst of the prolonged Israel–Palestine conflict suggest that the experience of coping is personal and individual even if the hardship, such as occupation, is experienced collectively. Coping can include internal and external resources such as personality, proactive problem solving, support from ideological or religion based groups, family support or religious sources (Punamäki 1990: 79–82; Pat-Horenczyk *et al.* 2009: 700–2). Research findings further suggest that religion can be protective against the harmful effects of political violence. The general level of health improved among those who relied on religious support (Sousa 2013: 515). This study will examine prayer as a coping method in the midst of the prolonged Israel–Palestine conflict.

Personal and institutional prayer is one of the most often-used coping devices in stressful situ-

ations in the context of the Israel–Palestine conflict (Häkkinen 2014: 38; Sousa 2013: 514–15). Religion as a means of coping is measured by the frequency of prayer or church attendance, but studies fail to answer the question what is it in prayer that helps a person to cope in stressful life situations? This study is set forth to fill that gap. Thus, the aim of this study is to understand how prayer helps in the midst of prolonged conflict and examine how prayer is utilised among Palestinian Christians across generations.

### Prayer, prayer types and lifespan

Religion – and prayer particularly – is multidimensional and thus difficult to measure (see a review of the literature in Finney and Malony 1985) and there are numerous definitions of prayer. William James defines it as ‘the very soul and essence of religion’ (James 2002: 505). Moving closer to contemporary times, definitions emphasise prayer as a form of communication or connection. In modern times encyclopedias have defined prayer, for example, as ‘human communication with divine and spiritual entities’ (Gill 1987: 489). Definitions in inspirational writings focus on such phrases as ‘loving God’, ‘praise’ or ‘adoration’ (Spilka and Ladd 2013: 11).

Scholars have provided a spectrum of types of prayer. The classical model of prayer (ACTS) includes four types: adoration, confession, thanksgiving and supplication. Adoration focuses on praise and worship of God; confession includes acknowledgement of one’s shortcomings, misdeeds or sins; thanksgiving includes expressions of gratitude, and supplication includes requests for God’s intervention in life’s situations and events. Mary Whiton Calkins (1911) identifies six types of prayer; petitions for material and immaterial things, penitence, thanksgiving, fellowship, contemplation and adoration. Following the work of Friedrich Heiler (1932), scholars Margaret Poloma and Brian F. Pendleton (1989: 47–50) have identified four different types of prayer; meditative, ritualistic, colloquial and petitionary. There is a considerable overlap among the descriptions of prayer types and, as prayer is multidimensional, prayer types, or prayer itself can never be fully grasped in words (Janssen and Prins 2000: 49–50).

Religiousness and prayer as part of it, is conceived of as a lifespan-development process (Spilka and Ladd 2013: 62). Personal beliefs and religious activity may change with age. However, it is not only the

age that matters; we need to consider also period and cohort effects. The period effect concerns a specific time in history that affects everyone, and the cohort effect involves people who were, for example, born around same time or have fought in the same war (Voas and Doebler 2011: 43). There is some debate about how, or if, religiousness changes during the life course when all these variables are taken into consideration (Schwadel 2011: 184–92). In this study age is the primary variable.

It is argued that there is a fall in religiosity and religious activity between the ages 18 to 30 (Allport 1950: 31–83; Levenson *et al.* 2005: 144–58). Previous studies indicate that church attendance and institutionalised religiousness is declining; however, the practice of personal prayer is not; it remains important for the young (Spilka and Ladd 2013: 78). Even those young adults who are not members of any church, or who don’t attend religious services at all, do pray (Janssen and Prins 2000: 10).

During middle age personal prayer seems to increase, although church attendance seems to decrease (Peacock and Poloma 1999: 328–32; Chaves 1991: 512–13). Changes such as getting married and forming a family seem to be factors in increasing prayer activity (Wilson and Sherkat 1994: 155–9). Research findings further suggest that personal prayer, parental religiosity, devotional practices and frequency of prayer increase (Spilka and Ladd 2013: 80; Paloutzian 1996: 127–35; Smith and Denton 2005; Levin and Taylor 1997: 80). However, middle age can also be characterised by growing doubt and a questioning of inherited religious views (Fowler 1981).

During old age religious activity tends to increase again; however older people may not necessarily become more religious, or attend church more often if they have not been ‘church goers’ earlier. Nevertheless, their private devotional activity and interest in religion does seem to increase (Levin and Taylor 1997: 80; Paloutzian 1996: 133). Previous studies suggest that near the end of life, religion and personal prayer become more important. Prayer is a major coping device for dealing with one’s personal health, safety and the uncertainty concerning life after death (Fry 1990: 744–7; Dunn and Horgas 2000: 344–8).

Prayer is said to be an active, cognitive coping strategy (Watts and Williams 1988: 109). A person who prays may attain, for example, feelings of inner peace, relief, understanding, relaxation, and emotional energy (Johnson 1959: 122; Bänzinger *et al.*



West Bank Barrier surrounds Ramallah and makes it difficult for Palestinians to move around. Photo: Riitta Luume.

2008: 103). In this article I will discuss the utilisation of prayer and prayer types as coping devices during the life course from young adulthood to old age in the midst of a context of conflict.

### Religious background

The region of the Middle East is the birthplace of three major religions in the world: Judaism, Islam and Christianity. All three have sacred places in the area. The estimated population of Israel is 8.3 million people (including the Golan Heights and East Jerusalem). The population is 75 per cent Jewish, 20 per cent Muslim, and Christians constitute less than 2 per cent. In the Occupied Palestinian Territory, the estimated population is 4.5 million. The population is 84 per cent Muslim, 13 per cent Jewish (approximately 600,000 Israelis live in illegal settlements in West Bank), whilst Christians form a little over 1 per cent (The World Factbook 2018; Raheb 2017: 17–18, 21).

Studies of attitudes towards religion in the region show that in Israel 43 per cent of the Jewish adult population consider themselves to be secular, although 82 per cent attend Passover Seder and 67 per cent light the Hannukkah candles. In the Arab population in Israel 35 per cent identify themselves non-religious or not so religious, and the percentage of those who identify as religious is 57. Both Jewish and Arab people say they have become more religious in recent years (Social Survey, Israel 2010). In the Occupied Palestinian Territory, the Muslims seem to be more

religious than the Christians; they attend the mosque, pray more often and see religion as an important regulator of social and political life (Sabella 2000: 17–19). Compared to Western Christian youth, Palestinian Christians in the Occupied Palestinian Territory have a higher level of religiosity (Munayer 2000: 70–3).

In the surrounding countries the population is mostly Muslim. Lebanon has the largest Christian community; 36 per cent of the population are Christian and 58 per cent are Muslims (The World Factbook 2018), however, as the rate of emigration is vast there are some challenges in counting the population (Faour 2007: 912–13); the numbers can vary. In Jordan the Muslim population is 97 per cent and Christians 2 per cent and in Syria Muslims make up 87 per cent of the population with Christians at 10 per cent (The World Factbook 2018). As the statistics indicate, Christianity is the minority religion in the region.

### Palestinian Christians

Many Palestinian Christians trace their ancestry to the earliest centuries of Christianity. They are proud to say that Christianity started in their backyard. Thus, you hear them quite often refer to themselves as the 'living stones'; as a community of people that keep alive the heritage of history and faith that is often connected to the ancient stone buildings and historical sites. They consider themselves to be indigenous Christians (Sabella 1999: 83–4; Sabbah 2007: 21–5).

Palestinians, and thus Palestinian Christians, face many challenges living under Israeli occupation. They confront violence, confiscations of their land, forcible displacements and hostility arising on the basis of illegal settlement activities, among other things (B'Tselem 2018; WCC 2017; OCHA Factsheet 2017: 16). Israel restricts movement between the Occupied Palestinian Territory and Israel as well as within the Occupied Palestinian Territory, which makes it difficult for Palestinians to reach workplaces outside of the West Bank and separates family members who are obliged to live apart from each other (OCHA Barrier portal). Earning a living becomes harder. The impact of the occupation, prolonged conflict and the inefficacy of the Palestinian Authority brings challenges. The unemployment rate for Palestine in 2017 was 25.7 per cent (PCBS 2017: 5).

The scale of emigration in the region is vast, and the prolonged forced displacement continues. The impact of the 1948 and 1967 wars (Bunton 2013;



64–74; Pappé 2006: 128–35, 184–91) on Palestinian Christians was harsh; over 80,000 Palestinian Christians were deported or left their homes in the areas of what was to become the state of Israel and became refugees, settling in the West Bank, Jordan, Lebanon and Syria (Tsimhoni 1993: 11; Colbi 1988: 163; Mansour 2012: 11–12). The biggest Palestinian Christian diaspora communities are found in Latin America, where the estimated number is around half a million, surpassing that of their original homeland (Raheb 2012: 9; Raheb 2017: 11). The reasons for leaving concern mostly safety and economics (Collings *et al.* 2012: 60).

The following numbers of the Palestinian Christians are estimates. As the extent of emigration is vast, there are no exact statistics available. The numbers of Palestinian Christians in Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territory are *circa* 175,000, of which around 120,000 live in Israel and a little over 53,000 live in the West Bank and Jerusalem and 1,200 in Gaza. Christians constitute less than 2 per cent of the population (Collings *et al.* 2012: 15; The World Factbook 2017).

The local Christian churches are mostly Palestinian, Arabic speaking congregations. Christian

churches in the Occupied Palestinian Territory can be grouped into four categories: The Eastern Orthodox Church, the Oriental Orthodox Church, the Catholic Church and Protestant Churches. This study is limited to Palestinian Christian Communities in the Occupied Palestinian Territory and the statistics are as follows: the Greek Orthodox Church (53%), Catholics (36%), Orientals (7%) and Protestants (5%). The numbers are estimated and vary in different studies (Sabella 1999: 90).

### Data

The data collection was conducted in February–April and November 2017. The total number of participants was thirty-five, of whom seventeen were female and eighteen male. The age range was from eighteen to eighty-one. The participants are from seven different locations in the Occupied Palestinian Territory and Israel and belong to nine different denominations: eleven belong to the Greek Orthodox Church, nine the Catholic churches, two the Oriental Churches and thirteen the Protestant Churches.

The Protestants thus were over represented. This may be due to familiarity with and trust of the



Graffiti done by Banksy greets people in Bethlehem. Photo: Riitta Luume.

researcher among the Protestants, as the researcher had lived in the area and was familiar with the community. The focus of this study is on prayer in general, not on the denominational utilisation of prayer; thus the over-representation of Protestants is not a fatal error. It is also noteworthy that the denomination of each participant was recorded by means of self-identification and might differ from possible Church records which tend to record families, not individuals. Several participants indicated that they had belonged earlier to another Church, however now identified themselves with another denomination.

The data collection method was focused interviews. The interviews were recorded on tape; each interviewee was given the opportunity to decline being recorded in which case paper and pen would be used instead. Three interviewees chose this option. The language of the interview was English; however, it was also possible to use an interpreter. Only one of the interviewees chose this option. Additionally, a diary was kept of the researcher's personal reflections.

Respondents were recruited in various ways. The researcher attended four church meetings and was introduced to the congregations to whom an open invitation to participate was announced. Three Christian organisations and one Christian social club were contacted and asked to send out an open invitation. Participants were also recruited through four Christian schools and one university. Participants were also found by means of the 'snow-ball method' whereby an interviewee introduces the researcher to the next participant. The participants were recruited if they met the criteria of identifying themselves as Palestinian or Arab Christian and were over the age of 18.

Half of the young adults were university students, studying religion. This is not necessarily a fatal fault as the primary task of the research was to examine the content and utilisation of prayer, thus it was desirable to interview people who would be expected to pray. This applies to all participants as the recruitment was mostly done within faith-based organisations and churches. This needs to be taken into consideration when analysing the results.

All the interviews were conducted by the researcher. The average duration of the interviews was around 45 minutes. The interviews included individual and pair interviews. Individual interviews were conducted with twenty-seven participants and pair interviews with four pairs (eight persons). The

pair interviews included young adults who did not want to participate alone. The participants were divided into three different age groups; young adults (18–34 years), middle-aged (35–59 years) and elderly (60+ years) adults. The age groups are intentionally rather large for the sake of anonymity. The distribution of the age groups is as follows: nine participants were young (YA 18–34 years old), eighteen middle-aged (MA 35–59 years old) and eight elderly (E 60 onwards).

Interviews were conducted as semi-structured, focused interviews. Semi-structured interviews provide an opportunity to address specific topics, while leaving space for the participants to offer new insights on the research focus. It also provides an opportunity for clarifications of the deeper meanings of everyday words (Galletta 2013; Hirsjärvi and Hurme 2014). One of the motives for using open-ended questions was to give a voice to the Palestinian Christians and allow the participants to speak about their lives. In this study the open-ended questions were particularly important as the language of the study was neither the mother tongue of the respondents nor the researcher and clarifications and explanations were needed.

The interviews were conducted very freely, following however a structure of questions divided into ten different theme groups. The themes were; identity, fears and challenges, coping, God, the church, the Bible, practising religion or spirituality, ecumenism, interfaith and the future. The questions began with such phrases as 'What do you think of...'; 'Please, tell me about...' followed by clarifying sub-questions. In this paper, I will focus on the answers concerning prayer. The questions about prayer were included in the theme of practising religion and were formulated thus: Do you pray? How often? What does prayer mean for you? Does it help and how does it help you? What do you pray for? Do you think your prayers have been heard? Open-ended questions were transcribed word for word, categorised and tabulated and finally analysed inductively to discover and to understand how prayer is utilised among the respondents.

## Findings

All participants (N=35) said that they pray. The frequency varied from every day to sometimes. Sixty-nine per cent of the respondents indicated that they prayed every day. Seventeen per cent said that they

prayed weekly in the church and eleven per cent indicated they they prayed, but did not indicate the frequency. When looking at the answers from the age-group perspective the results show that five out of nine (55%) young adults pray every day, thirteen out of eighteen (72%) of the middle-aged respondents pray every day and six out of eight (75%) of the elderly pray every day. Church attendance analysis

shows that most of the respondents attend church on a weekly basis; six of the young adults (66%), eleven of the middle-aged respondents (61%) and seven of the elderly (87%). One young adult and one middle-aged respondent indicated that they do not attend church.

Most of the participants report that prayer helps them in stressful life situations. Thirty out of the thirty-five respondents reported emotional support such as relief, strength, inner peace and stress relief. This interviewee describes how prayer is a form of stress release for her:

But I pray a lot at home. It is part of my daily chores, every morning I pray for half an hour at least. So, I wake up early for this and I think it is helping me a lot. It helps me to cope with the difficulties of the day, to cope with the huge difficulties we are living with here, stresses. All this, thinking about the future and the darkness of the future we are seeing. So, it's a way out for me. And it's stress release. (F12, MA)

Many of the respondents also told how praying in church with others is helping them to cope, as this respondent describes:

Well, it's a relief. Like, even if you are praying by yourself, but being there [in the church] united, and everyone is praying. It's also way of, it's like meditation. It's a relief. You only think about praying in a church. That moment on Sunday, you will have nothing in your mind ... So, being in church is giving like an hour, one hour and a half from your whole week, to give it to this holy moment and you pray. So, it is also a relief. And you come out relaxed. (F14, YA)

	Young adults (YA) n=9	Middle-aged (MA) n=18	Elderly (E) n=8	Total
Petitionary	11	24	9	44
Ritualistic	5	6	6	17
Meditative	1	5	1	7
Thanksgiving	3	6	3	12
<b>Total</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>38</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>80</b>

Table. Prayer types and age groups. The answers are not exclusive; one participant may have indicated several types.

Content analysis of the responses revealed four different prayer types: petitionary, ritualistic, meditative and thanksgiving. In this study petitionary prayers include requests for something; both materialistic and immaterial petitions (for guidance, protection, power, intercession). Ritualistic prayers are prepared prayers recited from a text or by heart, Meditative prayer concerns expressions such as 'adoration', 'listening to God' and 'privacy with God'. Thanksgiving includes offering up thanks for materialistic or immaterial things. The table below shows the prayer types and age groups.

### Petitionary prayer

Petitionary prayer is the most-often used prayer type in the study (44 mentions). Prayers included requests for material and immaterial things, but prayers for immaterial things were the most common. They included asking for protection or safety, power, strength or help in difficult life situations, guidance, prayers for peace, healing or good health, intercession on behalf of others, forgiveness of sins and material things.

Intercession was the most-often used petitionary prayer (11 mentions). An intercessional prayer is one offered on behalf of someone else and summons God to intervene in a life other than one's own (Tloczynski and Fritzsche 2002: 731). The intercessional prayer includes requests for the protection of, or general well-being and good health for, others. Praying for others is considered by participants to be a part of being Christian, being called upon to pray for others, but also as a means of coping. Most often the intercessional prayers were offered for the safety of one's family and children, as this respondent indicates:



But sometimes I think about my children. They are still young ... So, I think a lot about their future. But then I reach a point where I cannot do anything. I can't help anything. So, I say, God you know what you are doing so, please keep them safe and keep us so also. (M17, MA)

Intercessional prayer can also be experienced as a coping device, as this respondent mentions:

It's my communication with Jesus. He is my brother. And Mary, of course. I start with Mary and then I mention the names of all my friends, especially those who are sick. I put them on my list. On my way, I pray ... The more I pray for the others, the more I am happy, and my pain is gone. (M20, E)

Praying for others was mentioned by two young adults, seven of the middle-aged and two of the elderly participants. The middle aged respondents mostly offered intercessional prayers. Three of them mention praying for someone and it having a positive outcome, however, it cannot be proven whether it was the prayer or something else that helped the situation. Intercessional prayer is complex and controversial. It can also be a coping device for the person praying. S. O'Laoire's research (1997: 38) suggests parallel findings. There was only one elderly participant who indicated that they were being personally prayed for.

The second most-often used form of intercessional prayer involved the participant asking for help, protection and power or strength for themselves to continue in the midst of the stressful life situations (10 mentions). Living under occupation can be very stressful and safety is an everyday issue, as this respondent explains:

You have to pray, you see; when you wake up in the morning you don't know what is going to happen to you during the day, or if you go to the checkpoint or something, so I pray on a daily basis. (M03, MA)

Living under the occupation also has an economic impact and everyday life can be a struggle, as this interviewee describes:

I ask God to give me strength to continue because I have a lot of stress, family. I need money to bring them up and secure everything. ... And I ask God to give me the strength to continue. (F13, MA)

When all the answers were examined across the age groups, it was shown that one of the young adults, eight of the middle-aged and one of the elderly participants pray for their own safety and protection or help and strength in stressful situations. It seems that the middle aged pray more often for power and help to continue in the midst of challenges.

Asking for guidance (7 mentions) in life included decisions about work, studies, life in general or a difficult situation in life. Young adults asked for guidance in choosing a career and a spouse:

I pray in everything, everything. Before I chose theology, I said, God be with me to choose what I want. So, after the first year I think God was with me, so I chose it. Before I got engaged I think God helped me, that is the person who will be with me. (F05, YA)

The middle-aged participants used prayers for guidance concerning work and difficult situations in life or with family. Praying can include verbal praying or reading the Bible and 'hearing God's Word' through reading. One woman pointed out that it is very difficult to find a job in the Occupied Palestinian Territory and she prayed for guidance from God by means of reading the Bible in between two jobs:

So, I decided that I will open my Bible and read God's answer to me. And then when I closed my eyes, prayed a lot, and then when I opened my Bible, it was from Isaiah; who will go for us and then I said here I am Lord, send me. So, I knew at that time He wants me here. (F01 MA)

Family seems to be one of the biggest issues in prayer. When the knife attacks started in Jerusalem (in the autumn of 2014), this father asked for guidance as to what to do with his daughters going to school:

For example, when the recent events with knives started to happen everyone here was really afraid. And the first two, three days we

didn't send our daughters to school. Then on the same night we prayed, and we felt God, and we read Isaiah 43 where God says, if you walk in water I'm with you, if you walk in fire I'm with you. And we felt that God is talking to us, telling us, why are you afraid, I'm with you. So, next day we sent them to school. And I started to go to my work. (Mo2, MA)

Petitionary prayers tap into the conflict context on a more general level also. Six of the interviewees mention praying for peace or praying for the situation to ease:

But we will stand with high morals and looking for the end of the siege and we pray for peace with our neighbour Israel, or equal rights as in the UN resolutions and to live side by side in peace. (M11, E)

Praying for peace can also come through personal experience and a change of a person's own understanding, as this middle-aged respondent describes. In his younger years he had been fighting and confronting the Israeli soldiers and was beaten many times by the soldiers, thus ending up being bitter and hostile. A personal relationship with God, as he describes it, changed his attitude:

So, now I'm really praying for peace, I'm seeking for peace, I'm trying to do whatever I can do. That I will have peace, my family will have peace and my people as well, will have peace. So, and the Israeli soldiers as well. I look at them in a different way now ... I really pray for them. It's not what God intended for us, to be enemies. (Mo2, MA)

When the responses were examined across the age groups it was shown that only one young adult mentioned peace; three of the respondents who did were middle aged and two were elderly. This might indicate the impact of the experience of war among the middle aged and the elderly. One of the middle-aged interviewees pointed out that there had been many wars during her life:

Living under occupation is not something easy at all. Since I was born, we have been through too many wars. Actually, every two-three years,

we have a war. When I graduated from the high school the First Intifada started in 1986, 1987 and in 2000 we had the Second Intifada and every other year we have a war either on the Gaza Strip or on the West Bank. (Fo1, MA)

Petitionary prayers included also requests for forgiveness of sins (two mentions), general 'what do I need' prayers (four mentions) and health or healing (four mentions). It is noteworthy that half of the prayers for health were mentioned by the elderly. During late life prayers for health seem to increase. Only one specific material petition was mentioned.

Five of the participants indicate wrestling with God, being angry with Him and asking why?

Sometimes I get angry with him and I ask him: why? Concerning many things I would say why. But then if it's not me it would be someone else, so I just shut up and – it's evil and you have to fight. (Fo3, MA)

And sometimes you just say God why this is happening? You know, we are normal people, we are not theologians, we are not pastors. We don't understand the religion in that way, in that real way. So, we ask God, why this is happening to us? (M13, MA)

### Ritualistic prayer

The ritualistic prayer was the second most-often used prayer type. Respondents mentioned utilising ritualistic prayer such as praying with the rosary or reading from a prayer book or Bible during the course of one's own devotional practice and in church services. Prayer books were utilised quite often, as this respondent indicates:

And they have the book from the Lutherans ... This is good, every day we do it with (xxx). We thank God that we have Facebook; the only things I like to read are the Catholic prayers; words from any prayer will help. (Fo4, E)

As the Greek Orthodox Church has some of its liturgy in Greek, being able to join the prayers in Arabic was a reason for four of the respondents to attend a church of another denomination. This Greek Orthodox young adult had studied in Latin Catholic



school and was familiar with their prayers and attended their acts of worship in order to be able to join in and understand the ritualistic prayers:

So, for me, I prefer to pray, to go to the Latin Catholic because I practise, not to practise but I know the prayers there, so it's easier for me ... Yes, when I go the church I want to be one who participates in the prayer. Not to feel like I am asleep. No, I want to participate. When I go to the Greek church, I participate, but not like when I go the Catholic. When I finish it, I will be happy. (Anonymous interviewee)

For this participant the ritualistic prayer was the one that helped her during the most difficult times:

During my hardest time I prayed a lot using Psalm 23, God is my shepherd. That is my favourite. I just keep repeating it. Then I count up to the number of sixty-nine; that's the number of the words it has. (Fo3, MA)

This parallels with the research evidence showing that, when a person feels sad or is very stressed they may quite often engage in ritualistic prayer; the prayer you know by heart (Poloma and Pendleton 1989: 51). When the ritualistic prayer was examined according to the age groups it was shown that it was most utilised in the oldest age group (67%), followed by the young adult group (55%) and lastly in the middle-aged group (33%). Ritualistic or traditional prayer is understood to correlate with church attendance (Bänzinger *et al.* 2008: 110), which is also

evidenced by the present study, as the elderly group mentions ritualistic prayer the most often and attends church the most often. The content of the ritualistic prayers was not examined from the denominational perspective; however, it is noteworthy that most of the respondents belong to traditional churches and this may partially explain the high occurrence of ritualistic prayer.

### Thanksgiving

Thanksgiving is one of the oldest and well-known Christian prayer types. Many of the respondents mention thanking God in everyday life. Thanksgiving was the third most-often utilised prayer type and altogether made up 15 per cent of all the prayers. Sometimes the gratitude is deeply touching; as with this interviewee, who recollects initially having a lot of trouble in life and then a wonderful family trip in the midst of all the stress:

We had a very, very nice summer holiday. And then when I came back I just wanted to pray to say thanks for all the good I had received. So, we went to the Gethsemane Church, the one where he [Jesus] said his last prayer. And I just couldn't stop crying. It was really, that year was one of the toughest years in my life. (F17, E)

Even if there are disappointments or difficulties in life, thanksgiving is present, as this interviewee explains. She feels God is giving her many challenges, yet she is grateful for everything:

He [God] likes to challenge me a lot [laughing], He does. He does, yeah. But again, I always thank God for everything. Always, always, always. But again, I feel like He pushes me to the edge. Yeah. He likes to do that [laughing] I don't know why... I mean we can always be ungrateful if the thing doesn't work out. That means we just complain. I do complain a lot to him. But no, of course not. Nothing, nothing will sort of stop my faith or change my thinking. Nothing, nothing. (F17, E)

Thanksgiving was also seen as the primary essence of one's spirituality, as this respondent explains. He defined him-



Jerusalem is a holy city for the three Abrahamic religions: Christianity, Judaism and Islam. Photo: Shmuel Spiegeman.



Easter worship at the Mount of Olives. Photo: The Evangelical Lutheran Church in Jordan and the Holy Land.

self as a spiritual person rather than religious, thus thanksgiving is practising his spirituality and it is the core of his faith:

Yes, He [God] knows everything, so if you want to knock on His door, He knows why and when. And He knows what to do with you. So, you have to be thankful. I am, you know. I think I practise my spirituality every minute, every second when I'm thankful to God ... I feel that I am very thankful for everything. You know, even though you meet things that you can't understand. One of the people who is always thankful. Mainly for my family, even being in Palestine under occupation. (M13, MA)

When examined through the age groups, it showed that there is not an explicit difference between the groups. Three of the young adults mention thanking God (33%), compared to six of the middle-aged group (33%) and three of the elderly (37%).

### Meditative prayer

Meditative prayer was the least-often utilised prayer type (9%). Meditative prayer, or contemplation, is often described with phrases such as 'being in the presence of God' or 'feeling God's presence' and it is often seen as a subjective religiosity. Meditative or contemplative prayer is 'experimental knowledge' (Aumann 1980: 329–30) of 'being in the presence of God' rather than just reading or reciting the prayers. It doesn't necessarily include words, but involves just

being in the presence of God or feeling intimacy with God as this interviewee describes it:

So, when I go to church, I go with this idea that I want to go there, meditate, have some time between me and God. And, I just close my eyes and be with that, you know, it's just travelling into a different world. You know, that's the feeling coming from it. Yeah. (F17, E)

Contemplative or meditative prayer can also be verbal, but the approach to prayer and the experience are deeper, as this respondent reflects:

Each time I pray, I feel that is the first time I'm praying. When I feel that I'm praying for the first time, I read more the prayer, without just reciting it, but more on contemplating what I'm reading and this gives me like a spiritual, it fills my spiritual needs ... Not just reciting and saying words without not really feeling what I'm saying. (M16, MA)

Meditative prayer was utilised mostly by the middle-aged group (5 mentions) and it is only mentioned once in both of the other two age groups.

### Prayer experiences

Religious experience has been extensively studied. There is a wide variety of religious experiences from deep and profound feelings of peace and unity to sensations of light, warmth and sound (James 2002; Beit-Hallahmi and Argyle 1997: 73–9). It is a subject of debate what the experiences are and if they really exist (Spilka *et al.* 1985: 154–68). However, in this study the starting point is the experience of the participants and how they talk about it. In this study the prayer experiences also include the prayer answers. Positive prayer experiences were reported by twenty-three participants (65%). The participants report prayer experiences such as answers to prayer requests, a deeper understanding of one's life situation, the strong presence of God and physiological prayer experiences.

This young adult describes a prayer answered in relation to a family issue:

And I'm telling you, three years ago we faced as a family a very big matter, but now, after praying and believing, we pass over it. Because we believe in God, we pray and I believe that God is standing by us and protecting us, so our believing in God is getting bigger and bigger. (F11, YA)

Prayer experiences can also include dreams, as this young adult describes: he had been praying about his future and where to go to study. He felt God answered him through a dream:

Many things happened but I don't know if it's true or just dreaming; like, one day someone came to me in my dream and told me to come and follow. And I was like very peace and I was crying from happiness. Yeah, but, I don't know if it is psychological, inside deep in my soul, or if its true that God wants me. (M15, YA)

Many of the interviewees also mentioned feeling the presence of God during prayer. This elderly man had to have a medical operation. He was not a strong believer previously, however, surviving the operation and cancer impacted on his faith. He describes the presence of God like this:

During my operation, I felt that God was holding my hand and guiding my steps. Believe me, the doctor who detected the trauma, you know, the cancer, the tumour in my stomach, he told me that in your case nobody can detect the cancer, but miraculously it was detected. It was very small, it was in its first stage. So, it was a miracle. Whenever I go to see him, he says, you are one per million who was safe from this disease. So, I think God is with me. (M05, E)

The prayer experiences can be very physical, as this member of a traditional church explains. He attends weekly mass and the prayer experience is very deep during the ritualistic prayer:

When we invoke the Holy Spirit come to change the bread to body of Jesus and the wine into blood, this, I cannot tell you, I feel the presence of the Holy Spirit ... The Lord's prayer I feel my hands very, very, very warm. All my body is warm. And when I cry of Him, when they ask

the Holy Spirit to come. And you say the mass, you say thank you Jesus for this voice at your heart. You cannot resist, you cry. Cry of happiness, you cry because you feel you are loved. You are chosen, you are important ... And when we ask the Holy Spirit come, depends on the person, all my body shakes, sometimes I cry. Why I tell you this? This gives me strength to continue my week and if I miss the Sunday, I don't feel good. (M20, E)

When the responses across the age groups are examined, it shows that five young adults (56%), twelve of the middle-aged group (66%) and six of the elderly (75%) reported having experiences during prayer.

## Discussion

The present findings suggest that prayer is used as a major coping device among the participants. All participants mention that they pray, and most of them indicate that prayer is helpful in stressful life situations. Thirty of the thirty-five participants report that prayer provides positive emotional support such as relief, help and release of stress. This finding parallels previous studies that suggest that personal prayer correlates positively and supports one's well-being (Fabricatore and Handal 2000: 225; Maltby *et al.* 1999: 373). I will first discuss in general what the results revealed about how prayer helps practitioners to cope and then in detail how the utilisation of prayer occurs across the generations.

It is not possible to make any generalisations on the basis of the results gathered here as the number of participants was relatively small ( $n=35$ ). However, it is possible to draw some conclusions concerning this particular group of people and see some traces of trends at a more general level.

More than half (65%) of the participants report having experiences during prayer. These included possible answers to the prayer, feelings of divine presence and physical experiences of light and warmth during the prayer. According to the previous research, it seems that prayer experiences support one's coping even if there is doubt as to whether the source of the prayer experience is God or not. The psychological experience of receiving help is valid for the receiver, whether the ground is psychological or divine. Research findings (Maltby *et al.* 2008: 127;

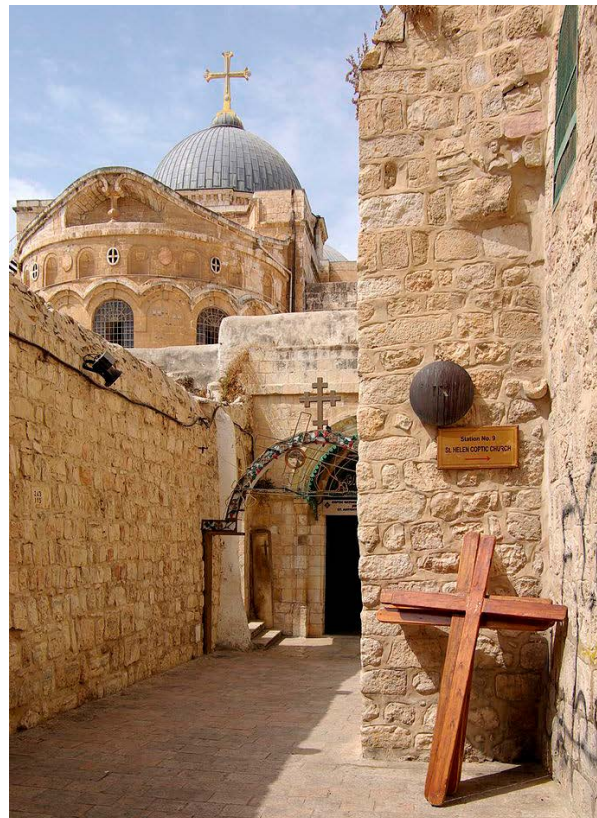


Poloma and Pendleton 1989: 50) suggest that prayer experiences are related to subjective well-being. Previous studies further suggest that prayer experiences may precipitate in a stressful life situation such as losing a job or the impending death of a relative (Hay 1982; Hardy 1979 cited by Beit-Hallahmi and Argyle 1997: 84–5). Prayer experiences seem to be a source of coping among the respondents and the high occurrence of the prayer experiences may point to the stressful life situation they are in.

Participants report positive support in praying for others. Previous studies indicate that praying for others, or offering religious support, has a positive effect on the well-being of the praying person (Koenig *et al.* 1998: 513–21; O’Laoire 1997: 38). Intercessional prayer was the most often-used petitionary prayer. The high occurrence of intercessional prayer is in correlation with previous studies (Koenig *et al.* 2012: 53–4), showing that people tend to pray for others. In the present study most of the intercessional prayers concern safety and the protection of family and friends. The prayers are more outspoken about protection and safety rather than merely the general well-being of others. This may be due to the volatile context.

Praying with others is reported to help in the midst of challenges. Cindy A. Sousa (2013: 514–15) suggests in her study on women in Gaza that it is not only the act of praying, however important it may be, but also the institutional and organisational aspect of religion that supports the person praying. Previous studies further suggest that collective prayers build collective identity and expressions of who the participants are as a community (Fuist 2015: 528, 533). Ritualistic prayer was the second most-often used prayer type. Being together in the same church and saying the same prayers together seems to support the participants’ ability to cope. It seems that the church community plays an important role in coping.

One striking finding was that living amid conflict does not seem to have an impact on personal prayers for peace. Only 7 per cent of all the prayers made were for peace. However, it would be anticipated that people living in volatile or conflicted contexts might pray more for peace than people in other situations. This is not the case among these participants. This might indicate a sense of hopelessness in the midst of what seems to be a situation that will not change. Previous research suggests that when a person has no control over a situation and it becomes chronic



Via Dolorosa, 9th Station in Holy Sepulchre, Jerusalem.  
Photo: Berthold Werner.

the person may rely more on emotion-based prayers, such as thanksgiving, rather than problem-focused prayers such as petitions (Laird *et al.* 2004: 253). The occupation has been going on for fifty years and intifadas and wars have occurred one after another. The age cohorts reveal that even the youngest members of the young adult cohort have experienced at least one intifada and many wars in the Gaza Strip. Some participants in the oldest cohort have seen all the wars since the Israel’s War of Independence in 1948.

Across-generation analysis showed that there are some parallel findings and some differences with previous research findings. It seems that over the life course religiosity is apparent even in stressful conflict context. People still try to live normal lives amid the challenges, and prayers concern one’s personal life. It seems that the prayer life of the young adult group differentiates in some aspects from what tends to be the general life-course religiosity, and the two older age groups follow the pattern more closely.

It has been argued that there is a sharp decline in religious belief and activity between the ages 18–30 (Pratt 1949: 115; Beit-Hallahmi and Argyle 1997: 152). This is not the case with the present study. Sixty-



six per cent of the young adults attend church on a weekly basis and all of them report praying. Religious activity among young adults seems to be higher in the present study than is shown in other studies tapping the religiosity of youth in non-conflict context (Voas and Doeblér 2011: 47; Janssen *et al.* 1990: 102). The results of this study suggest that religion and prayer are important for the young adults. The finding is in consistent with previous studies (Munayer 2000: 71–3).

Most of the research on youth and religiosity in non-conflicted contexts has been conducted in Western countries within fairly stable political situations and quite a different social and cultural setting; thus comparisons cannot be made. However, the results concerning personal prayer life do seem to be parallel. Personal prayer is important for young adults regardless of the context in which they are living, or their religious orientation (Munayer 2000: 70–2; Nance *et al.* 2010: 341–3; Maltby *et al.* 1999: 373). In a study conducted among Palestinian youths in Israel, in the 24-item questionnaire the claims ‘Prayer helps me a lot’ and ‘God means a lot to me’ have the highest correlations (Munayer 2000: 71–2). The content of petitionary prayers seems to be of the same type; personal issues and needs-based prayers are most common. These findings indicate more of a lifespan prayer life than a conflict versus non-conflict context.

In general, the Palestinian young adults seem to become more secular in the context of institutionalised religiosity (Sabella 2000: 17–19), but a personal prayer life is important to them. At the same time their Christian identity is becoming more important (Munayer and Horenczyk 2014: 368). Research from former Yugoslavia indicates that in a conflict where nationalism and religion are involved the religion becomes more important among the youth (Voas and Doeblér 2011: 46–7). The Israel–Palestine conflict is not a religious conflict; however, religion is very visible in the conflict. Palestinian Christians are not a minority on ethnic grounds; however, they are a very small minority in terms of religious numbers. This might be one of the explanations as to why religious identity has become more important among the Palestinian young adults.

Findings concerning the two oldest age groups reveal that these groups seem to be more in line with what tends to be a more general lifespan prayer life among the middle-aged and elderly. The middle-aged

group prays the most petitionary prayers and attends church the least. This high occurrence of petitionary prayers may correlate with the stage of life, as midlife involves many different aspects, such as family, children and work and provides many reasons for prayer (Spilka and Ladd 2013: 81; Peacock and Poloma 1999). Church attendance tends to decrease during the middle-age years and then increase again in later years. This might indicate a life-course pattern that during midlife church attendance is lower due to the business of work and family (Peacock and Poloma 1999: 332).

The results further suggest that the highest prayer frequency is among the elderly, as previous studies also suggest (Spilka and Ladd 2013: 78, 83–4; Levin and Taylor 1997: 80–2). The utilisation of the prayer types follows what tends to be the general life-course pattern. Petitionary prayers concern mostly health and intercession for family and friends. However, it is noteworthy that among the elderly the percentage of prayers for peace is the highest (25%), compared to the middle-aged (17%) and the young adults (11%). This may be related to the age cohort experience of wars and intifadas. Ritualistic prayer is most often used among the elderly. This is in correlation with church attendance, which is also the highest among the elderly.

As a conclusion it can be said that prayer is a significant coping strategy for the Palestinian Christian participants living under occupation. Patterns of lifespan religiosity and differences in the utilisation of prayer in age groups is apparent. However, the conflict may explain some of the differences in the results compared to previous studies; such as the importance of religion for the young adults, the importance of the church community and petitions for safety. ■

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